A Few Tips for Opinion Piece Writers  
Andrew Leigh

In Australia, opinion pieces are more important than they probably should be. Lacking broad-based expert-written policy magazines like the *New Republic, Atlantic Monthly* or *Spectator*, much of the discussion about ideas in Australia occurs on our opinion pages. And there isn’t much space for it. We have five broadsheets in Australia: the *Sydney Morning Herald, Age, Australian, Canberra Times* and the *Australian Financial Review* (the last a tabloid-sized broadsheet). Given that most have their own regular columnists, this means only about five to ten places for new voices each day.

There are two implications of this. First, if you have something to say that’s of interest to a generalist audience, it’s worth trying to write an opinion piece and get it placed. While academic articles are important, most will only be read by a few thousand people. The same goes for online journals. By contrast, the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* have a circulation of over 200,000. Second, there is a lot of competition for Australia’s limited opinion page territory, so you will need to be persistent, and may need to send it to more than one paper before it gets a run.

What follows was originally written as the basis for a training session that I conducted for OzProspect fellows, a talented bunch of young Aussies who are working to get their ideas into the public domain. But a couple of people afterwards expressed interest in a document that aimed to demystify the opinion piece game. I can’t claim to be an expert on this – certainly no-one’s ever offered me a weekly column. But over the past five years, I’ve had over 40 opinion pieces published, so I guess I know something about how the process works. I also passionately believe that Australia needs new voices in the public domain. Not just younger voices (though as Mark Davis has shown, there’s a strong argument for that), but a greater diversity of perspectives and ideas, from people who’ve never been heard from before.

1. How to write an opinion piece

(a) The first paragraph
The first paragraph of an opinion piece should catch the reader’s eye. You must signal that your topic is an interesting one, and you have something novel to say about it. Your model should be the opening paragraph of a good short story, not the beginning of an academic essay. Link your idea into that day’s news if you can.

(b) Structure
Your reader should have a general idea of where you are going – but you don’t need a roadmap at the outset. We need to know in the first paragraph that you are writing about political donations, but not that you will give us two arguments and two examples.

(c) Humour
Opinion writing is half entertaining, half informing. A delicious word out of place, or a clever turn of phrase, will work wonders to keep your reader going – and absorbing your argument. As my friend Michael Fullilove puts it, substance requires form. Here’s a trio of examples that I think worked well.
• Paul Krugman (*New York Times*):
  When the members of the appeals court were writing up their ruling on Microsoft, did an animated paper clip pop up on their screen, bat its eyelashes and say: "You seem to be writing a legal opinion. Would you like some help?" Actually, we could all use some help here: the Microsoft case is fundamentally difficult.

• David Burchell (*The Australian*):
  Labor strategists are no doubt crestfallen that their lovingly crafted tax and family income policies – aimed at suburban mums unable to get back into the workforce – sank without trace. Medicare Gold conspicuously failed to go platinum. The only Labor policy which bit was the symbolic effort of clawing back a few bucks from the very richest private schools to spread around all the others in penny-packets. Latham as a pantomime Robin Hood.

• Greg Craven (*Sydney Morning Herald*):
  Of all the topics likely to clear an Australian barbecue, federalism is the most pungent. In terms of grinding dullness, it ranks with Mark Latham's autobiographical monologue. It therefore is a tribute to the sheer cussedness of Premier Bob Carr that our own constitutional "F" word is now on everybody's lips.

  … One of the biggest problems with Australian federalism is that it often is seen as an historical anachronism, like steam trains and Phillip Adams.

  *(NB. You probably want to be pretty relaxed about making enemies if you take this route)*

(d) Disclosures
If you have a personal interest, it should be disclosed, and can be done concisely, eg. I once wrote “One option would be for universities to follow the lead of the University of Technology, Sydney, which offers a bachelor of international studies that incorporates a full year at an overseas university (disclosure: my mother works with this program).” In general, you don’t need to disclose membership of a political party when writing about politics, unless you’re writing during an election season.

(e) Length
700 words good. 500 words better. 800 words is about the maximum non-columnists are given. Be concise. Even if you don’t like its politics, the *Economist* is a marvellous example of how to convey a lot in very few words. Someone once described their writing as being as dense as a freeze dried meal – add water to a 500-word *Economist* article, and it would swell up to be a 3000-word article in most other newspapers or magazines.

(f) Byline
Your article should conclude with a one-sentence description of who you are. My standard byline is “Dr Andrew Leigh is an economist at the Research School of Social Sciences in the Australian National University”. Newspapers will not normally be willing to publish your website and/or email address, as they want to channel feedback to their letters page/website.

2. How to place an opinion piece

(a) Which newspaper?
A natural way to write an opinion piece is to “hook” it to a top story in that day’s paper. But in some cases, you may be writing about a theme that is in all the newspapers. In this case, how you choose which paper to send to really depends on your personal tastes. Don’t worry too much about the ideology of the paper. There is a little bit of this in Australia, but not enough to worry about. For example, although the
Australian’s opinion page is typically more conservative than the Sydney Morning Herald’s opinion page, the lead-up to the Iraq war saw the Australian run anti-war opinion pieces, and the Herald run pro-war opinion pieces.

To find out the contact details of the opinion page editor, call the newspaper’s switchboard. Fairfax Sydney: 02 9288 2822, Fairfax Melbourne: 03 9600 4211, News Limited Sydney: 02 9288 3000, Canberra Times: 02 6280 2122, Courier Mail: 1300 304 020, Herald Sun: 03 9292 1226. Ask for the opinion page editor. If you get his or her answering machine, have a pen in hand; the message will generally include their email address.

Don’t confine yourself to the broadsheets. Some tabloids – notably the Herald Sun and Courier Mail – are apparently keen to attract contributors. The ratio of potential readers to competing contributors is probably highest in the tabloids.

**b) Pitching**

Once you get to know an opinion editor, you can “pitch” a story. This means calling the editor in the morning (10am-noon), with an idea that links to that day’s news. They will generally say no, but if they say “yes”, then you have a near-guarantee that they will run your piece.

**c) The Follow-Up Dance**

Opinion page editors in Australia are a busy lot. Every day, they have to solicit or select the articles for the next day’s paper and edit them into shape by about 6pm. Through no fault of their own, they’re often unable to respond to all the mail in their inbox. This means that if you haven’t heard back after a day or two, it’s as likely to mean that the editor hasn’t read your piece than that s/he read it and hated it. In my experience, it’s fine to politely follow up, without being pushy.

In my case, after writing an opinion piece, the process usually goes like this:

i. Send the article to the opinion editor of paper #1. The email has a one-paragraph summary of the article, a one-sentence description of me (if this is the first time I’ve sent it to them), and my mobile phone number. Attached to the email is a Microsoft Word version of the opinion piece, which is also pasted at the bottom of the email – so if they’re busy, they can simply scroll down.

ii. Wait for 1-2 days.

iii. Send a follow-up email or call the opinion editor of paper #1

iv. If you get a rejection, or surmise that the editor isn’t interested, it’s ok to move on to another paper. If you’ve received no response to your first two emails, then the best thing to do is to drop another email to the opinion page editor, politely saying that you’re now submitting the piece elsewhere.

v. Send the article to the opinion editor of paper #2.

vi. Repeat steps (ii) to (v) until article is finally placed in a paper.

My record number of rejections for a single opinion piece is six (Sydney Morning Herald, Australian, Age, Australian Financial Review, Canberra Times, Courier Mail). The piece was eventually published in the West Australian. This was clearly overkill on my part – not to mention a trifle humiliating – but I tell the story to
illustrate that you needn’t give up after the first rejection. In general, it is not unusual for me to spend more time placing a piece than writing it.

*Never* send an opinion piece to two papers simultaneously.

Don’t spend any time worrying about your heading – the newspaper will never use it.

If you’re writing about different topics at the same time, then in the unlikely event that two papers want to run different opinion pieces from you on the same day, make sure both opinion editors know beforehand.

### 3. Next steps

(a) **What if the piece doesn’t make the papers?**
Four terrific internet journals that accept contributions are [www.apo.org.au](http://www.apo.org.au), [www.onlineopinion.com.au](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au), [www.newmatilda.com](http://www.newmatilda.com) and [www.australianprospect.com.au](http://www.australianprospect.com.au). Their readerships are much smaller than the newspapers, but they’re still a good way to reach policy wonks. Note that *New Matilda* and *Australian Prospect* require readers to pay in order to view their articles.

(b) **What if the piece does make the papers?**
Then you should ask – nicely – whether you can get paid for it. On the day that it comes out, write a nice email to the opinion editor, thanking him or her for running it, and sending your postal address and bank details in order to deposit the payment. Some papers pay 50c/word; some have a flat rate; others, eg. the *Australian Financial Review*, don’t pay at all.

Happy writing, and good luck!

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